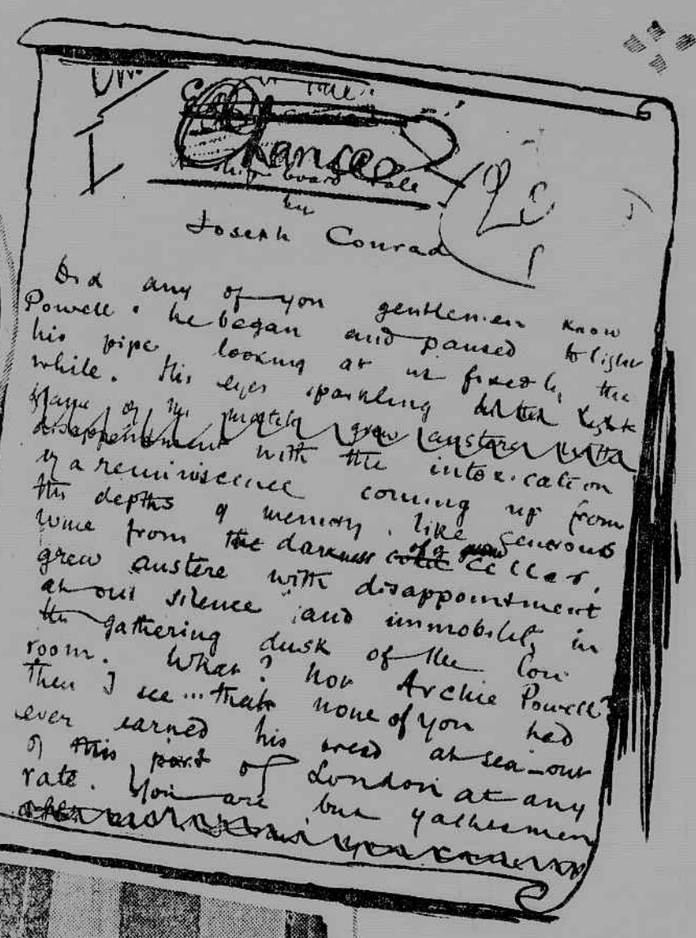
Joseph Conrad, Rationalist

Called the Subtlest Writer of the Age, He Excels in His Love of Beauty, His Insight Into the Mind, His Sense of Character

A bust of Conrad, by Jo Davidson



Facsimile of the first page of "Chance," in manuscript

One of the best photographs of the famous writer

MR. CONRAD, observes Edward Moore in "The New Statesman," is incomparably the most subtle writer of his age. "Even his silence is significant, and it is as certain that his politics and his philosophy are profound as that he has told us nothing about them. He has not, indeed, a 'philosophy' at all, like Mr. Wells or Mr. Shaw. Is it because he is too skeptical or because he is too sure? That one has to ask such a question shows how much lies behind his work." And the writer goes on to say:

"There are three qualities which stand out in Mr. Conrad's novels—the love of beauty, the insight into the mind, the sense of character. With beauty, the mind and the moral conflict he is concerned almost exclusively. The passions he has portrayed, it is true, but he has portrayed them preeminently in their effect upon the mind and upon character.

"In short, he has studied them under glass, and as a psychologist and a moralist. The soul he has not tried to know at all. The conflict in his novels is not the spiritual, but the moral, conflict. And this is what separates him from Dostoievsky, whom, as a psychologist, he resembles so much.

"Dostoievsky showed man in his relation to God; Mr. Conrad shows him in his relation to men and to nature. The former is a mystic, the latter a rationalist. The one knew human nature, human and divine; the other is interested in human nature simply as human nature.

God?

"Neither Mr. Conrad nor his characters mentions the name of God, and we feel it is because they would consider it insincere, even theatrical, to do so. There is something admirable in this reticence. Not to say a word more than one means—to say a word or two less, if possible—that is the sure way of making one's words memorable. And Mr. Conrad's words are memorable, more memorable even than those of Dostoievsky.

"Mr. Conrad, then, is preëminently artist, psychologist and moralist; in other words, he is interested essentially in beauty, the mind, and character. And he is interested perhaps in beauty primarily. He writes by instinctive choice of beautiful things; of the sea, of ships, of tropical skies, and of men whose lives have still the atmosphere of romance around them—of seamen, of barbarians, of South American bandits whose minds have something of the naïve morality of the Renaissance.

"And he never writes, as Stevenson constantly did, with the design of being 'romantic.' His beauty is not stuck on. On the contrary, when he describes a scene it strikes us first by its astonishing truth and then by its astonishing beauty.

"Mr. Conrad writes in pictures, for the pictures come, and what he shows us is not action, but a progression of dissolving scenes, continuous and living, which in the end reflect action and give us a true apprehension of it." The reader may turn, just at this point, to one of the arresting scenes in the latest Conrad work, "The Arrow of Gold" (Doubleday Page & Co), and observe the technique with which the book's hero is brought for the first time into the picture:

"The door at which Mills rang came open almost at once. The maid who opened it was short, dark and slightly pock-marked. For the rest, an obvious femme-de-chambre, and very busy. She said quickly, "Madame has just returned from her ride,' and went up the stairs, leaving us to shut the front door ourselves.

"The staircase had a crimson carpet. Mr. Blunt appeared from somewhere in the hall. He was in riding breeches and a black coat with ample, square skirts. This get-up suited him, but it also changed him extremely by doing away with the effect of flexible slimness he produced in his evening clothes. He looked to me not at all himself, but rather like a brother of the man who had been talking to us the night before. He carried about him a delicate perfume of scented soap.

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"The upward cast in the eyes of Mills who was facing the staircase, made us both, Blunt and I, turn round. The woman of whom I had heard so much, in a sort of way in which I had never heard a woman spoken of before, was coming down the stairs, and my first sensation was that of profound astonishment at this evidence that she did really exist. And even the visual impression was more of color in a picture than of the forms of actual life. She was wearing a wrapper, a sort of dressing gown of pale-blue silk, embroidered with black and gold designs round the neck and down the front, lapped round her and held together by a broad belt of the same material. Her slippers were of the same color, with black bows at the instep. The white stairs, the deep crimson of the carpet and the light, blue of the dress made an effective combination of color to set off the delicate carnation of that face which, after the first glance given to the whole person, drew irresistibly one's gaze to itself by an indefinable quality of charm beyond all analysis and made you think of remote races, of strange generations, of the faces of women sculptured on immemorial monuments and of those lying unsung in their tombs. While she moved downward from step to step with slightly lowered eyes, there flashed upon me suddenly the recollection of words heard at night, of Allégret's words about her, of there being in her 'something of the women of all time.'

Perfection

"At the last step she raised her eyelids, treated us to an exhibition of teeth as dazzling as Mr. Blunt's and looking even stronger; and indeed, as she approached us she brought home to our hearts (but after all I am speaking only for myself) a vivid sense of her physical perfection in beauty of limb and balance of nerves, and not so much of grace, probably, as of absolute harmony.

"She said to us, 'I am sorry I kept you waiting.' Her voice was low pitched, penetrating and of the most seductive gentleness. She offered her hand to Mills very frankly as to an old friend. Within the extraordinarily wide sleeve, lined with black silk, I could see the arm, very white, with a pearly gleam in the shadow. But to me she extended her hand with a slight stiffening, as it were a recoil of her person, combined with an extremely straight glance. It was a finely shaped, capable hand. I bowed over it and we just touched fingers. I did not look then at her face.

"Next moment she caught sight of some envelopes lying on the round marble-topped table in the middle of the hall. She seized one of them with a wonderfully quick, almost feline, movement and tore it open, saying to us, 'Excuse me, I must . . . Do go into the dining room. Captain Blunt, show the way.'"

Thus we meet the heroine. As for Mr. Conrad's heroes—well, to go back to the writer in "The New Statesman":

"Mr. Conrad's heroes are at once fortifying and discouraging: they fight, but they fight with their back to the wall. They have not the right to despair, however; for if they cannot win, they may not be defeated! Their endeavor, of course, is not to advance and to conquer—that would appear to Mr. Conrad the most extreme romanticism—but to maintain one or two things without which they would perish. And these are a few truisms. Man voyages over the devouring waste of existence on nothing more stable than a few concepts, a few platitudes.

"This conception, so simple in appearance, is, in fact, extremely subtle. Only a profound mind could have given such fundamental meaning to platitude. It is the conception of a skeptic who is sure of one or two things; who accepts the minimum, who accepts platitude, indisputable platitude, because he is sure of nothing else. He has found two or three planks to put between him and the incommensurable, and that suffices him.

"And thus while he denies himself hope, as austerely he denies himself despair. His hopelessness is not like Mr. Hardy's, a hopelessness without bound; it is a sane hopelessness, a hopelessness full of courage. And his very skepticism must be the source of infinite intellectual enjoyment to him—how many interesting questions it must raise! Yes, skepticism like Mr. Conrad's makes one interested in life; it is, perhaps, the source of his own interest in it."

Never Hurried

Robert Lynd, the British critic, gives an immensely vivid picture of Joseph Conrad in the current issue of "Mainly About Books."

"Mr. Conrad," says he, "has never been in a hurry, even in telling a story. He has waited on fate rather than run to meet it. 'I was never,' he declares, 'one of those wonderful fellows that would go afloat in a washtub for the sake of the fun.' On the other hand, he seems always to have followed in his own determined fashion certain sudden intuitions, much as great generals and saints do. Alexander or Napoleon could not have seized the future with a more splendid defiance of reason than did Mr. Conrad when, though he did not yet know six words of English, he came to the resolve, 'If a seaman, then an English seaman.'

"He has always been obedient to a star. He likes to picture himself as a lazy creature, but he is really one of the most dogged day laborers who have ever served literature. In 'Typhoon' and 'Youth' he has written of the triumph of the spirit of man over tempest and fire. We may see in these stories not only the record of Mr. Conrad's twenty years toil as a seaman, but the image of his desperate doggedness as an author.

"'Line by line,' he writes, 'rather than page by page, was the growth of "Almayer's Folly."' He has earned his fame in the sweat of his brow. He speaks of the terrible bodily fatigue that is the lot of the imaginative writer even more than of the manual laborer. 'I have,' he adds, 'carried bags of wheat on my back, bent almost double under a ship's deck-beams, from 6 in the morning till 6 in the evening (with an hour and a half off for meals), so I ought to know.' He declares, indeed, that the strain of creative effort necessary in imaginative writing is 'something for which a material parallel can only be found in the everlasting sombre stress of the westward winter passage round Cape Horn.' This is to make the profession of literature a branch of the heroic life. And that, for all his smiling disparagement of himself as a Sybarite, is what Mr. Conrad has done."

The novelist at home, about to enjoy a cup of tea with his wife and young son

"When We Dead Awaken"

THE last of Ibsen's plays, "When We Dead Awaken," has just been played for the first time in America. It was given a few week-end performances by Leigh Lovell and Octavia Kenmore at the Neighborhood Playhouse.

This piece was written only a year before the great Norwegian poet died. Ibsen is said to have been fully conscious of the fact that he had only a tiny span left and to have hastened, lest he be unable to finish "When We Dead Awaken."

A grim piece of writing, it pictures, with the usual Ibsen passion for symbolism and mystic expression, the awakening of souls which have, as they put it, failed to grasp the true significance of life. Professor Arnold Rubek, a sculptor, meets the woman who inspired his masterpiece. His wife, Maia, meets a bear hunter. The drift of the theme is sufficiently shown in the closing scene, here reprinted:

(Professor Rubek and Irene appear over the edge of the precipice at the back. He has his plaid over his shoulders and she has a fur cloak thrown loosely over her white dress and a swansdown hood over her head.)

PROFESSOR RUBEK

(Still only half visible above the edge.)

What, Maia! So we two meet again?

MAIA

(With assumed coolness)

At your service. Won't you come up?

(Professor Rubek climbs right up and holds out his hand to Irene who also comes right to the top.)

(Professor Rubek coldly to Maia.

So you, too, have been all night on the mountain, as we have?

MAIA

I have been hunting—yes. You gave me permission, you know.

ULFHEIM

(Pointing downward) Have you come up that path there?

PROFESSOR RUBEK

As you saw.

ULFHEIM

And the strange lady, too?

PROFESSOR RUBEK

Yes, of course (with a glance at Maia). Henceforth the strange lady and I do not intend our ways to part.

ULFHEIM

Don't you know, then, that it is a deadly, dangerous way you have come?

PROFESSOR RUBEK

We thought we would try it, nevertheless. For it did not seem particularly hard at first.

ULFHEIM

No, at first nothing seems hard. But presently you may come to a hard place where you can neither get forward nor back. And then you stick fast, Professor! Mountain-fast, as we hunters call it.

PROFESSOR RUBEK

(Smiles and looks at him) Am I to take these as oracular utterances, Mr. Ulfheim?

ULFHEIM

Lord preserve me from playing the oracle! (Urgently pointing up toward the heights) But don't you see that the storm is upon us? Don't you hear the blasts of wind?

PROFESSOR RUBEK

(Listening) They sound like the prelude to the Resurrection Day.

ULFHEIM

They are storm blasts from the peaks, man! Just look how the clouds are rolling and sinking—soon they'll be all around us like a winding sheet!

IRENE

(With a start and a shiver) I know that sheet!

MAIA

(Drawing Ulfheim away) Let us make haste and get down.

ULFHEIM

(To Professor Rubek) I cannot help more than one. Take refuge in the hut in the meantime—while the storm lasts. Then I shall send people up to fetch the two of you away.

IRENE

(In terror) To fetch us away! No, no!

ULFHEIM

(Harshly) To take you by force if necessary—for it's a matter of life and death here. Now, you know it. (To Maia) Come, then—and don't fear to trust yourself in your comrade's hands.

MAIA

(Clinging to him) Oh, how I shall rejoice and sing if I get down with a whole skin!

ULFHEIM

(Begins the descent and calls to the others). You'll wait, then, in the hut till the men come with ropes and fetch you away.

(Ulfheim, with Maia in his arms, clambers rapidly but warily down the precipice).

IRENE

(Looks for some time at Professor Rubek with terror-stricken eyes). Did you hear that, Arnold?—men are coming up to fetch me away! Many men will come here——

PROFESSOR RUBEK

Do not be alarmed, Irene!

IRENE

(In growing terror.) And she, the woman in black—she will come, too. For she must have missed me long ago. And then she will seize me, Arnold! And put me in the strait-waistcoat. Oh, she has it with her in her box. I have seen it with my own eyes——

PROFESSOR RUBEK

Not a soul shall be suffered to touch you.

IRENE

(With a mild smile.) Oh, no—I myself, have a resource against this.

PROFESSOR RUBEK

What resource do you mean?

IRENE

(Drawing out the knife.) This!

PROFESSOR RUBEK

(Tries to seize it.) Have you a knife?

IRENE

Always, always—both day and night—in bed as well!

PROFESSOR RUBEK

Give me that knife, Irene!

IRENE

(Concealing it.) You shall not have it. I may very likely find a use for it myself.

PROFESSOR RUBEK

What use can you have for it here?

IRENE

(Looks fixedly at him.) It was intended for you, Arnold.

PROFESSOR RUBEK

For me!

IRENE

As we were sitting by the Lake of Taunitz last evening——

PROFESSOR RUBEK

By the Lake of——

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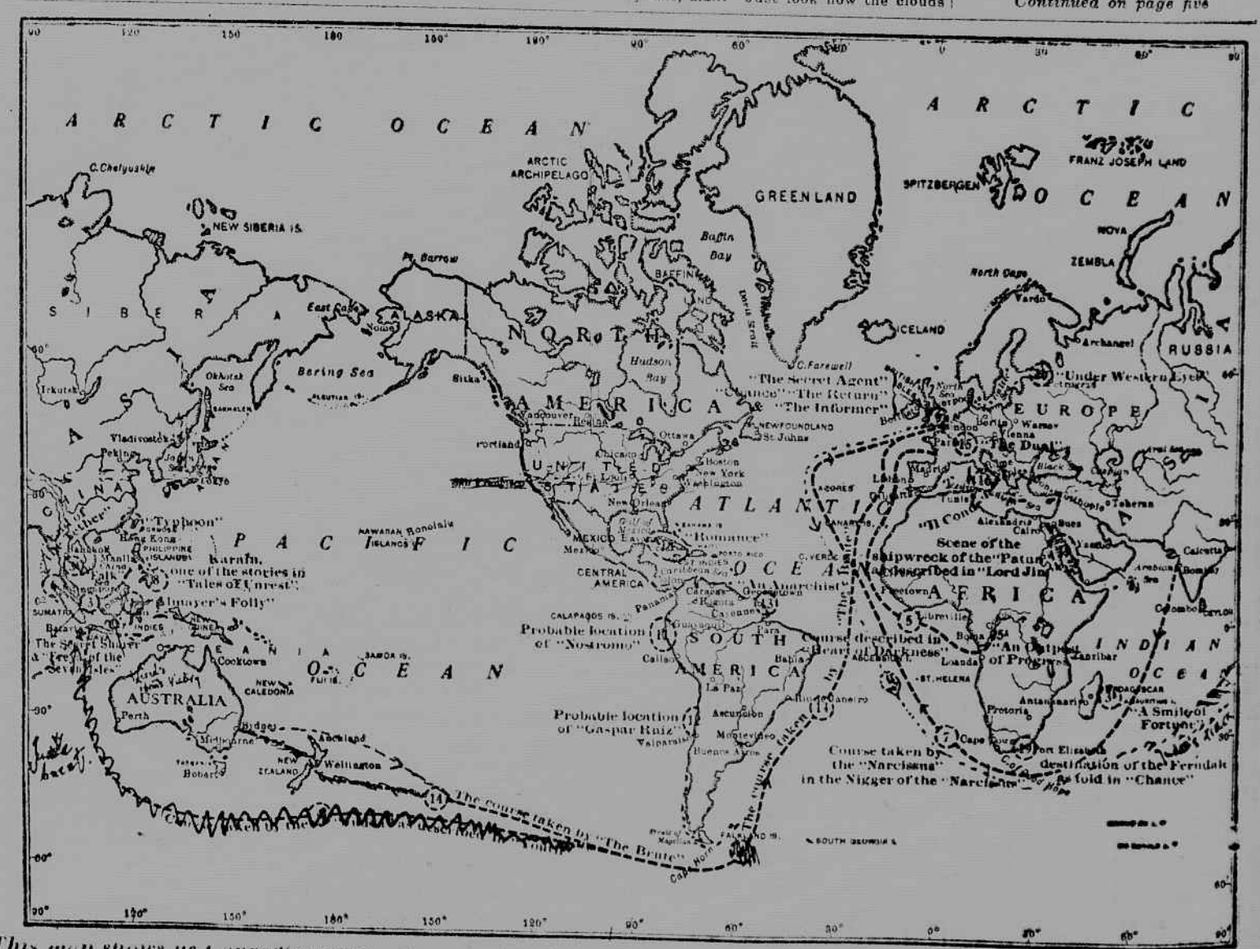

This map shows us Conrad's world—the world he has explored and reproduced in his fiction. We see just where the action of his most famous romances transpires. It is a scope far greater than is encountered in the work of most writers. And this map does not include the Marseilles where Monsieur Georges of "The Arrow of Gold" first met the fabulous Rita, nor the waterways and Spanish groves which served these two in their amazing play for the "last pretender."